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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how native Japanese speakers use honorifics in everyday social interaction. Honorifics are affixes, words, and formulaic phrases that follow linguistic and sociolinguistic rules and are believed to mark a speaker's politeness toward an addressee or another referenced person. The honorific system is incorporated into most aspects of Japanese grammar. This study examines the validity of traditional theory and previous empirical research on Japanese honorifics by exploring how a Japanese speaker's use of them is related to characteristics of the speech situation. Using ethnographic methods, data were gathered from conversations of four Japanese speakers with various interlocutors in their daily lives. Results indicate that: (1) utterance type is highly influential in determining a speaker's use or non-use of honorifics; and (2) honorifics and used far more in creative and expressive ways (e.g., criticism, sarcasm, playfulness) than traditional theory recognizes. It is concluded that such creative use of honorifics represents an important dimension of Japanese, and that theory not taking this usage into account is therefore incomplete. Contains 12 references. (Author/MSE)

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Use of Japanese Honorifics in Daily Life: What the Traditional Theories Do Not Say

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This study investigates how Japanese speakers use honorifics in everyday social interaction. Honorifics are affixes, words, and formulaic phrases that follow linguistic and sociolinguistic rules and that are believed to mark a speaker's politeness toward an addressee or another referenced person. The honorific system is incorporated in to most parts of Japanese grammar. Most empirical sociolinguistic research on Japanese honorifics has employed questionnaires and interviews which rely on self-reporting by speakers and are not based on everyday speech acts. The empirical evidence suggests, however, that research based on real speech interactions produces results that are often at odds with results derived from purely self-reported empirical research. This study examines the validity of the traditional theory and previous empirical research on Japanese honorifics by addressing the question of how a Japanese speaker's use of honorifics is related to characteristics of the speech situation. In order to address this question an ethnographic approach was used to collect data from conversations of four Japanese speakers with various interlocutors in their daily lives. Results indicate that: (1) utterance type is a highly influential factor in determining a speaker's use and non-use of honorifics; and (2) honorifics are used far more in creative and expressive ways -- for expressions such as criticism, sarcasm, and playfulness -- than the traditional theory recognizes. The study concludes that the creative use of honorifics represents an important dimension of Japanese honorifics, and disregarding this dimension leaves any description or instruction of Japanese honorifics incomplete.

This study investigates how Japanese speakers use honorifics in everyday social interaction. Honorifics are affixes, words, and formulaic phrases that follow linguistic and sociolinguistic rules and that are believed to mark a speaker's politeness toward an addressee or another referenced person.

Honorifics is one of the major areas of study in Japanese linguistics. The scholarly work on Japanese honorifics, which describes the grammatical forms and the sociolinguistic determining factors of the speaker's choice of use and non-use of honorifics, can be roughly categorized into two strands in terms of their standpoints. The first strand in the literature is prescriptive and based on the traditional scholarly conceptions of honorifics (e.g., Kindaichi 1959; Martin 1964; Oishi 1974, 1975;

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O'Neil 1966; Ide 1982; Minami 1987), while the second strand of literature is sociolinguistic in nature and attempts to investigate the actual use of Japanese honorifics in society (e.g., The National Language Research Institute 1957, 1983; Ikuta 1983; Ogino et al. 1985; Hori 1986). The main interest of the first strand of literature is not to describe how Japanese honorifics are used in actual speech situations, but rather to tell the reader what Japanese honorifics are believed to be and how they are supposed to be used. For speech lessons and how-to books, including textbooks of Japanese as a foreign language, the scholarly conceptions are the basis of correct use of honorifics, and these conceptions prevail widely among Japanese speakers today.

The second strand of literature, based on the sociolinguistics standpoint, relies largely on surveys and interviews of native speakers. The data collected from questionnaires are not actual expressions used in real-life situations, but rather the expressions that informants thought they would use. How well these data reflect actual speech remains an open question, since it is sometimes hard for informants to avoid the preconceived idea of stereotypical patterns when they produce the expressions that they think they would say.

In the past decades, numerous sociolinguistic studies from a variety of languages have clearly demonstrated that native speakers' self-reported notions of their language use, as well as what we find in the scholarly literature and grammar books, differs in some ways from the data collected from naturally occurring speech utilizing observation and tape-recording.[1]

Therefore, this study examines the validity of the traditional theory of Japanese honorifics by utilizing ethnographic approach to address two research questions: (1) How do Japanese speaker's use of honorifics relate to interlocutor characteristics, and (2) how do Japanese speaker's use of honorifics relate to the characteristics of the speech situation.

Previous research shows that sex, age, educational, and socioeconomic background are important factors in determining honorifics usage by Japanese people. In addition to these four variables, the use of honorifics may also vary according to the geographical region in which the speaker resides. In order to minimize the variation of these five parameters, I chose as participants four Japanese women who live in the Tokyo metropolitan area and share the following characteristics: (1) they were all female; (2) they were in their late 30's; (3) they each had graduated from a four-year university in the Tokyo metropolitan area; (4) since graduation they had been living in the Tokyo metropolitan area for about 15 years; and (5) in terms of economic status, they all belonged to the upper-middle class. Regarding their occupation, they were all housewives and mothers.[2]

For the data collection I used audio recording, participant observation, and informal interviews. The four participants' speech data were audio-recorded from natural situations where they spoke with a variety of people on different topics covering a broad range of speech interactions. The four participants' conversations with total of 50 interlocutors were analyzed. Those 50 interlocutors included family members, friends of various level of closeness, instructors and teachers (such as children's piano and organ teachers, a knitting teacher, and a computer instructor), and service persons (such as electricians and shop keepers).

Among the various kind of honorifics, this study particularly examined the participants' use of (1) the polite nominal ending form *-desu* , the polite verbal ending form *-masu* , and their negative and past inflectional forms (i.e., addressee honorifics, or *teineigo* 'polite words'), and (2) the honorified verb forms (i.e., referent honorifics, or sonkeigo 'exalting words' and *kenjoogo* 'humbling words').[3]

Regarding the first research question (i.e., the relationship between interlocutor characteristics and use of honorifics), the traditional theory of Japanese honorifics

recognizes the following interlocutor (or the referent) characteristics as influences on the speaker's use of honorifics: (1) the relative social position between the speaker and the referent (who may be the addressee), (2) the relative age difference between the speaker and the referent (who may be the addressee), (3) sex differences between the speaker and the referent (who may be the addressee), (4) whether the speaker and the referent (who may be the addressee) belong to one group (ingroupness), or different groups (outgroupness), and (5) closeness between the speaker and the referent (who may be the addressee).

The results of my study generally confirmed that these factors influence the participants' use of honorifics. For example, the four participants tended to use honorifics more frequently with the older interlocutors who are not close to the participants. However, when I compare the traditional descriptions of honorifics with the results of my study, I find two conflicting points regarding interlocutor characteristics and the participants' use of honorifics. First, in my study the interlocutor's sex did not seem to be an influencing factor in the participants' use of referent honorifics. Second, the term (and the concept of) 'social status' seems to be inappropriate to describe interlocutor characteristics. Rather, the interlocutor's role was an important determing factor in the participants' use of honorifics. For example, the participants used honorifics frequently with people who had a teaching role. However, this may not be because teachers have a higher social status than the participants, but rather because they have more power or authority in a specific situation. Actually, in the interviews all four participants said that social status was not an important determining factor for them to use honorifics. Moreover, the participants reacted negatively toward the expression 'social status': They did not think a certain person or a certain occupation had higher social status in Japanese society. They said that they try to speak politely to people who have more controlling power over the particular situation, such as their child's schoolteacher or physicians.

Previous descriptions of honorifics seem to be often based on a traditional idea of Japanese society, in which the vertical relationships between individuals are strong. In these traditional descriptions a Japanese speaker's use of honorifics is often described within a certain organization, such as a company, in which each individual's status, or ranking, is clearly recognized. My results suggest that these descriptions do not always apply to real social situations in present-day Japan. This is especially true for the younger generation, such as the four participants of my study, who have been raised and educated in a democratic environment. Compared to an older generation, my participants seem to have a weaker perception of social status and higher versus lower interpersonal relationship based on difference of sex.

Regarding the second research question (i.e., the relation between the situational characteristics and the participants' use of honorifics), the results of my analysis generally confirmed the validity of the traditional descriptions of addressee honorifics: the participants tended to use addressee honorifics more frequently when the situation was formal and the topic of the conversation was serious. For example, the participants switched from non-use to use of addressee honorifics when they talked about business matters and a child's illness.

However, I found two significant points which are seldom focused on in the existing literature. First, the participants of my study used honorifics far more in creative ways than the traditional theory recognizes especially with their friends and family members. Second, utterance type is a highly influential factor in determining a speaker's use of honorifics. These two points are not mutually exclusive.

Concerning the creative use of honorific, there were utterances in which the use of addressee honorifics sounded excessively formal and the addressee honorifics were not used to express formality in a traditional sense, but rather to express playfulness,

criticism, sarcasm, or strong assertion, mostly with a playful key. The following two situations are examples.

> Situation 1. One afternoon, when Meiko (one of the participants of my study) is chatting with her friends Mrs. Nishi and Ms. Y in her living room, Mrs. Ima, a friend of theirs, visits her with her home-made Japanese sweets and joins their conversation. The four of them continue chatting over a cup of tea, cake, and Japanese sweets. Ms. Y asks Mrs. Nishi if she baked the cake that she brought. She answers that she did. Immediately after Mrs. Nishi's answer, Meiko adds a playful comment:
>
> *Meiko: Watashi NN (=M's daughter) tsukutta n desu [laugh]. Sugoi deshoo! Anna dekkai no tsukutta n desu yo! [laughs]*
>
> Meiko: I made NN [laugh]. Isn't it amazing! (I) made such a huge one! [laughs]

Both Mrs. Ima and Mrs. Nishi made home-made desserts and brought them to Meiko's, and they are given compliments on them. On the other hand, since Meiko did not make anything for the tea, she does not have anything on which to be complimented. Then, she says she made such a big child, NN, as if she should be complimented also for this. Meiko's utterances were humorous and everyone laughed.

> Situation 2. Satoko (one of the participants of my study) and her mother talk about Satoko's daughter RK. Satoko says that RK does not have persistence and durability in terms of learning something. Mother disagrees saying that RK has been taking swimming lessons persistently. Satoko answers her mother's opinion:
>
> *Satoko: Are wa sukidakara...*
> *Okeikogoto no konki nante hanbun wa hahaoya no konki desu ne.*
>
> Satoko: Because (RK) likes it (=swimming).
> The persistence in (the child's) taking lessons is half her mother's persistence.

Satoko continues, saying that even though the weather was bad and she had a headache, she took RK to her swimming and organ lessons persistently. Satoko's mother laughs and agrees with her opinion. This statement is Satoko's self-admiration, and in a sense

she is asking for appreciation of her hard work as a good mother. Satoko's use of a [+AH] form with a playful key seems to soften the imposition of her opinion, which at that moment is contrary to her mother's, and her demand for recognition.

As these two examples illustrate, the participants often used addressee honorifics in a playful key, and the utterances with unconventionally used honorifics served the following functions: (1) making a conversation entertaining; (2) mitigating awkwardness, such as in accepting compliments or minimizing the interlocutor's mistake; and (3) softening the imposition in utterances such as criticizing, self-admiring, or disagreeing. These functions were not mutually exclusive.

Not only addressee honorifics but also honorified verb forms were used in unconventional ways by the participants. Referent honorifics are most commonly associated with politeness and they are supposed to be used to express the speaker's deferential attitude toward the referenced person. However, the participants in my study used them when referring a person to whom the participants need not express their deferential attitude such as a nephew's high school friend, a stranger, and unspecified people. For such occasions, the meanings expressed by the use of honorified verb forms were criticism, sarcasm, and playfulness. The following Situation 3 is one example.

Situation 3. Kazue (one of the participants of my study) is talking about her new home with her friend, Mr. Ike, who is an architect and made the house plans.

Mr. Ike: Kono ie tte koredake gochagocha areba arunarini omoshiroi tte kanji ga shichau na, nanka...
Kazue: Soo, minna ga nanka itte kudasaru wa yo.

Mr. Ike: This house, (it) has an interesting appearance in its own way (even if it) is messy with a lot of stuff like this, somewhat...
Kazue: Yes, many people say something (about the house to me).

Kazue's new home, which was designed by Mr. Ike, is unique and different from ordinary Japanese houses. People who visit her house never fail to praise it. Kazue was

tired of listening to various comments, especially those which were off the point. Therefore, her use of the honorified verb form to exalt the group of unspecified people who commented was an excessive use of deference in order to express sarcasm toward them.

The second point of my finding is that the participants' use of honorifics is highly dependent on the kind of utterance. Therefore, even though the sociolinguistic characteristics of the interlocutor and the situation and the topic of the conversation are given, these are not still enough to prescribe the speaker's use of honorifics. Within one topic of the conversation, the participants used honorifics actively, rather than in a static way, in order to perform a certain speech act effectively. For example, in a conversation with close friends and family members, where non-use of honorifics was the norm, the participants used honorifics when they performed an imposing speech act such as requesting and asking an information-seeking question. Especially the use of honorifics for expression of criticism, sarcasm, and playfulness is highly dependent on the speaker's judgement at every moment in the conversation.

The data of this study were collected from a very limited number of people, and also the number and the kind of their interlocutors are limited. Therefore, the results obtained from this study do not necessarily represent Japanese speech in general. However, the following two suggestions for classroom teachers can be drawn from the results of my study. (1) In the formal setting of teaching Japanese as a foreign language, only the traditional meaning and usage of Japanese are commonly introduced. It might be helpful for learners of Japanese to be introduced to the whole view of honorifics usage, including unconventional usages, and presented with actual examples from naturally occurring conversation. (2) When introduced to honorifics, the learner of Japanese is usually taught that interlocutor characteristics of interlocutor and conversation setting are influencing factors of the speaker's use of honorifics. Those static factors are certainly

constraints and relatively easy for beginners to recognize. However, students should also be instructed that dynamic factors (i.e., topic of the conversation and the utterance types) also play a large role in the Japanese speaker's use of honorifics. These instructions may improve the more advanced learner's awareness especially, although the instruction itself need not be linked directly to the proficiency of the learner's use of honorifics.

The teacher's guidebook for honorific education published by the National Language Research Institute (1990) writes that the most reliable measure to evaluate the Japanese learner's proficiency is to see how appropriately the learner uses honorific expressions (p. 16). I believe that systematic instructions on the Japanese speaker's actual use of honorifics, which I presented on this paper, would help greatly learners of Japanese to achieve higher proficiency.

NOTES

1. Examples of such studies encompass the analysis of syntax (e.g., Wolfson 1976, 1978, 1979; Pica 1983), language choice (Blom and Gumperz 1972), and differences in men's and women's language use (e.g., Eakins and Eakins 1978, Brouwer et al. 1979, Zimmerman and West 1975).

2. Previous research on Japanese honorifics (e.g., Nomoto 1957, NLRI 1983) reports that people who were in their 30's and who were in high educational and socioeconomic levels exhibited a wider range in their use of honorific expressions than did other groups. This result suggests that the participants in my study should be an interesting choice for analysis.

3. The reason for the choice of those forms is that those forms were most frequently used in the data. In addition to its frequent occurrence, honorification of verbs is the most salient and crucial vehicle for expressing deference toward the person referred to.

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